



# Families gone **‘Wild’**

*Forever Wild Workshops help families learn to hunt and fish together*

Story by Amber Leberman | Photos courtesy of Tasha Sorensen

**A** Wyoming Game and Fish Department pilot project in Lander is harnessing the power of family, community, and word-of-mouth to attract new hunters and anglers—while at the same time helping other state agencies and non-governmental organizations evaluate their hunting and fishing recruitment and retention efforts. Forever Wild Workshops are a series of customized outings for those with limited hunting or fishing experience. Tasha Sorensen, conservation education specialist, developed the workshops to meet the needs of new residents to Lander.

Sorensen started from the ground up, by walking through Lander, speaking with residents, talking to local real-estate agents, and visiting local businesses.

Sarah Adams moved to the region in 2009 with her husband, Raymond, a family-practice physician at Fort Washakie. She said Raymond wanted to teach their six children to hunt and fish, but because all the children are younger than 10 years old, “we thought we would have to wait a few more years.”

Unlike recruitment efforts that focus solely on children and youth, the Forever Wild

Workshops require participation by parents. Adams learned about the workshops from another mother in her homeschooling network.

“I knew that this would help us get out in the wilderness together as a family sooner, and I also knew that my kids would learn and grow so much from the experience,” Adams said. She appreciates the opportunity for her children to gain “hands-on life skills.”

Lander’s location made it particularly well-suited to serve as the location for the pilot program. “There’s hunting and fishing 30 minutes or less away from any location in

Lander,” Sorensen said. “If we’re going to do a hunt, it’s not going to be a three-hour drive—it’s right out their back door.”

## **NO EXPERIENCE NECESSARY**

Since Forever Wild Workshops’ inception this spring, 33 participants from five families have participated in three workshops. The first workshop, held at Worthen Meadows Reservoir, was primarily focused on fishing, but also included recreating safely in bear country, packing for a day-hike, and basic first aid.

Although instruction took place in a group, Sorensen asked Lander Region Game Warden Brad Hovinga to give individual attention one particularly high-energy youth participant.

“Like I told the families, ‘We will tailor these workshops to fit your needs,’” Sorensen said. “It’s not a one-size-fits-all approach.”

Lander Region Fish Supervisor Kevin Johnson also assisted on the day of the workshops.

“A lot of them had never fished before, to the point of not knowing how to bait a hook or even cast,” Johnson said. “By the second one they were able to go out on their own, and we have found out that some of them have since then.”



**OPPOSITE PAGE: Annette Yates and Joseph Adams learned to fish at the first Forever Wild Workshop at Worthen Meadows, near Lander.**



**ABOVE: During the second workshop at Louis Lake, Lander Region Fish Supervisor Kevin Johnson (right) helps Madeleine Sweeney fillet a fish while her sisters Julia, Catharine and Teresa watch. LEFT: Volunteer Terra Hernandez and Conservation Education Specialist Tasha Sorensen prepare lunch for workshop participants.**

After the fishing workshops, the Sweeney and Yates families invited friends to join them fishing at Worthen Meadows and Louis Lake.

"The students become the teachers in short time," Johnson said.

Evaluation of the surveys that participants completed before and after the workshop revealed that they had gained the skills that Sorensen sought to impart.

As national statistics show a long-term decrease in overall hunting and fishing participation, state agencies are focusing on recruiting new hunters and anglers, and on retaining those who are occasional participants.

"There has been a gradual decline in hunter numbers over the last 20 years, a very steady, unstoppable decline," said Matt Dunfee of the Wildlife Management Institute. "At the same time, the agencies have expanded as needs and pressures on natural resources are increasing—we have an unsustainable model. Under the North American model of conservation, hunters and fishermen pay the bills for the vast majority of natural resource conservation. That's the model in this country that makes it unique from every other country in the world."

Through the Forever Wild Workshops pilot project, Game and Fish is helping the Wildlife Management Institute and other state and non-governmental wildlife agencies refine the evaluation tools they use to determine whether recruitment and retention efforts are working.

"The question we're trying to answer is: 'When she uses the evaluation templates, the questionnaires, the surveys, and the other tools we give her—does she see ways to improve her program and prove its effectiveness in recruiting hunters?'" Dunfee said.

Sorensen has been meticulous about gathering quantifiable data about the participants' attitudes and experience, as well as evaluations

of each workshop's content and instructors. She is especially pleased to see those who formerly identified as non-hunters begin to identify themselves as hunters.

Hovinga has also seen participants evolve. "We've seen the natural progression of introducing people into outdoor sports," Hovinga said. "We introduce people into shooting sports, and that leads to hunting. Some of these people who never thought they'd be a hunter—they're now thinking it might be fun to shoot a sage grouse, or an antelope, or to go on an elk hunt. It's really something else to watch."

The second workshop combined lake fishing on Louis Lake with stream fishing on the Middle Popo Agie River. Participants were also introduced to fly-casting, fly-tying, and spinner making.

The third workshop spanned three days and included a hunter education class as well as a range-day introduction to shotgunning, .22-caliber rifles/pistols, big-bore rifles, muzzleloaders, and 3-D archery target practice. Instruction also included survival skills, small-game processing, hunting ethics, and wildlife conservation.

The Forever Wild Workshops are operating with in-kind support by sponsors and donors such as North Platte Walleyes Unlimited, Sierra Trading Post, Wyoming Wildlife Federation, Federal Ammunition, Allwayz Manufacturing, Central Wyoming Community College, Sinks Canyon Center, and Brunton/Primus.

#### **FAMILY FOCUSED**

"I couldn't believe that this was a program geared toward families, and they wanted to include all of the family in the workshops," Adams said. "I can't think of any other program that I have ever encountered that sees my littlest ones—especially the youngest

ones—as an asset, not a hindrance."

Adams said that, as the mother in a large family, she takes on much of the responsibility for planning family outings. The Forever Wild Workshops have provided her family an opportunity to enjoy hunting and fishing with her family without having to worry about logistics.

During sessions for adults and older children, toddlers were invited to play nature bingo, play a matching game to identify wildlife, and go on an outdoors color-sorting scavenger hunt.

"This program is set up to do whatever it can to help us fall in love with the outdoors, and all that it has to offer," Adams said. "I'm 36, and pregnant with number seven, and just shot my first rifle, shotgun, and bow. It was so much fun, and although I may never become an avid hunter and angler, I have a deep appreciation and respect for these skills that I never had before. I see them so much more than just other people's pastimes. They are great skills that I think everyone should have some experience with."

Dunfee said that occasional hunters are more likely to become regular hunters if they build a network of people—uncles, fathers, mothers, other family members, and community members—who also hunt. "That process makes the difference between someone who buys a license once every five years and someone who buys a license every year," Dunfee said.

Adams said that the Forever Wild Workshops have made her "much more on-board and understanding" of Raymond's desire to go elk hunting. "We're able to talk about the supplies that he needs—including buying a gun, which I was hesitant about before—where he'll be hunting and staying, and what we'll do with the meat if he gets an elk," Adams said.

"It doesn't do any good if they don't have anyone at home who has the interest to take them out and help them enjoy the outdoors," Johnson said.

Daniel Rollino, 14, had fished a few times with his Boy Scout troop in California, but "it was never the main focus of the trip." Until he participated in the workshop at Louis Lake, Rollino said: "I'd never really had a whole day—just going out there and fishing. The poles that they gave us, the attention and the help was really great."





**TOP:** Information Specialist Jeff Obrecht helps Owen Sweeney, Jr., during the third workshop's range day. **ABOVE:** Lander Region Wildlife Biologist Stan Harter demonstrates field-dressing a cottontail. **RIGHT:** John Adams (left), Annette Yates, Madeleine Sweeney, and Joseph Adams await their turns to practice shooting.



Outfitting parents and children for a hunting or fishing expedition can strain a family's budget, so the department works with corporate sponsors to provide equipment. Sponsors provided fishing poles for use by each family, and Sorensen was able to acquire rifles at-cost for the youth participants.

"I think that for many people, and for us, one of the difficulties in trying new sports is the investment that's required in the necessary equipment," said Regina Sweeney, who has participated in the workshops with her husband, Owen, and seven children.

Rollino, who had been considering purchasing a gun before the third workshop, eventually chose to purchase the model of big-bore rifle that he used during the workshop. "I actually got to feel it before I bought it," he said.

He said he was surprised when Fritz Meyer of Wind River Mountain Outfitters offered to lead a guided elk hunt for him; his sister, Katie, 23; and other family members.

"Mostly I was excited that we would be able to go fishing," Rollino said. "I didn't think that I'd be going hunting with them. I thought that I'd get my hunters [education certification] through this, but I didn't expect to go on a guided hunt."

Jason Hunter, Lander region wildlife supervisor, is arranging for other families in the program to participate in a deer hunt.

#### UNPLUGGED

Sweeney said she hopes other families—especially children who spend a lot of time watching television or using a computer—have the opportunity to experience the Forever Wild Workshops. "I think it's really important for their ability to concentrate, for their appreciation for the outdoors and natural things, and also just so that they know that life isn't always about entertaining them," Sweeney said, noting that hunting and fishing can help children develop patience. "There's a lot of waiting involved, and the animals come when they come."

Hunter has helped to lead all three workshops. "The kids are just so excited, especially on my station, to shoot the .22s and then go up and look at their target and see how they did, or that they hit the paper at all, because some of them have never shot a firearm before," Hunter said.

Hunter said that, in addition to recruit-

ment and retention of new hunters and anglers, the Forever Wild Workshops help the public better understand the role of Game and Fish.

"These families are seeing what the department is all about, how hard our employees work, and that we're committed to doing things like this," Hunter said. "They have a really good outlook of the department and want to see us succeed. That's huge as we're going through some proposed license-fee increases."

Hovinga said that having participants go through the Forever Wild Workshops has "done nothing but foster" positive relationships with the community beyond checking permits in the field. "They can see you for who you are and that you're a game warden and can enforce laws, but that you also have this teaching side," Hovinga said. He said he expects to receive feedback from the participants as their hunting and fishing careers continue, "that they know they can talk to you when they have issues, if they have input on seasons, they feel comfortable calling you up and telling you what they think," Hovinga said.